

**POLITICS AND HUMANITARIAN AID:
BASQUE REFUGEES IN THE NORTH EAST AND CUMBRIA
DURING THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR**

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May 1937 saw the biggest single arrival of refugees Britain had seen in modern times and the only one in our history to be almost entirely made up of children. They were 4,000 children and a number of adults from the Basque regions of Spain, refugees from the Civil War that had seen their regional capital Guernica destroyed by aerial bombardment the previous month. Around four hundred of the children were looked after in this region for almost two years. They were at no.40 Percy Park in Tynemouth, 'The Larches' on the Allendale Road in Hexham, in a converted Poor Law Institution in Brampton, and at Hutton Hall near Guisborough. The Catholic Church looked after about half of the total in children's homes and convents in Newcastle, Carlisle, Darlington and Spennymoor. The episode is of interest for three reasons. Firstly, how so many child refugees were looked after entirely by the efforts of the local labour movements, churches and voluntary organisations is an interesting story in itself. But it also provides an angle on the politics of support for Republican Spain and the campaigns around it. Finally, any modern history involving the reception of refugees in the region may have some contemporary relevance, even taking account of a unique set of circumstances.

Arrival

The Basque provinces of Spain had been granted political autonomy by the Republican government and for this reason a traditionally Catholic and conservative area of the country supported the Republic against Franco's army revolt. The Basque Church hierarchy, for similar reasons, was the only one in Spain to support the Republic. The industrial wealth and strategic position of their ports also made the Basque areas an important target for the military rebel forces. By the spring of 1937 Franco had the provinces surrounded, the ports blockaded from the sea, and the towns and cities under constant bombardment from German and Italian aircraft; the most notorious example was the destruction of Guernica. Conditions for the civilian populations were desperate: daily air raids, acute shortages of food and all essentials.

Leah Manning, President of the National Union of Teachers and a prominent Labour Party figure, was in Bilbao at the time. She represented the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, a coalition of the organisations raising humanitarian aid for the Republic. She had

also, with her NJCSR colleagues Wilf Roberts, Liberal M.P. for North Cumberland and the Independent M.P. Eleanor Rathbone, been actively helping with the evacuation of refugees from the Bilbao area to France (1). As Basque children were being evacuated in accompanied groups to France, Belgium, Mexico and the Soviet Union Leah Manning lobbied the British government to permit an entry of children to Britain. She enlisted the support of the TUC, where Sir Walter Citrine believed that this cause could be presented as single-issue, non-political, and thus of a different order from other Aid Spain campaigns the TUC leadership were reluctant to support (2). The Basque government insisted that Catholic organisations be involved, and for nine months, and with reluctance, they were. The NJCSR could not act as the umbrella body for the campaign because neither the TUC nor the Catholic Church would participate in an organisation that was prepared to work with Communists. Therefore a separate organisation, the Basque Children's Committee was formed, although its leadership contained much the same people as the NJCSR: Roberts, Rathbone, and the maverick Tory the Duchess of Atholl.

The British government finally agreed to permit up to 4,000 children to enter, on the strict understanding that absolutely no public spending was to be involved in their maintenance.

On 23 May 1937 4,000 children whose parents had applied for their evacuation, and selected according to a quota system based on the representation of the political parties in the Basque parliament, sailed for Southampton under the protection of a British destroyer. Fifteen priests and about two hundred women teachers and assistants accompanied the children. One of the assistants, Carmen Gil, had survived the bombing of Guernica and eventually worked at Percy Park. She had volunteered to come after discussion within her staunchly Republican family:

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1. Adrian Bell, *Only For Three Months: The Basque Children in Exile* (Norwich, Mousehold Press 1996); Jim Fyrth, *The Signal Was Spain: The Aid Spain Movement in Britain 1936-1939* (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1986) give good accounts at the national level.
 2. Tom Buchanan, 'The Role of the British Labour Movement in the Origins and Work of the Basque Children's Committee 1937-39' *European History Quarterly* vol.18 no.2 April 1988 p.165.

‘I remember my brother; he said I know a lot of people who want their children to go to England. They are my friends; some are going to the front. They will always be grateful to you for taking their children to England where they know they will be safe. He said, I was not running away, I was doing the best job’ (3).

This suggests that to accompany the children was seen as war work in the Republican cause. The refugees were initially accommodated in a tent camp at North Stoneham provided by Southampton Trades Council and local churches, and staffed by volunteers. One of those involved recorded that, to keep the peace, it was necessary to divide the camp into political sections: Basque nationalist, Socialist, Communist and Anarchist. Once in the camp the children painted the initials of their parents’ political party or trade union on their belongings, or decorated tents with the hammer and sickle, illustrating the politicised environment they had come from (4). The plan was to disperse the refugees to group accommodation around the country organised by local Basque Children’s Committees, and this had been done by September 1937. But before that took place came some incidents that were to cause some public relations difficulties for the Basque Children’s Committees and the local efforts for the duration of the Spanish war.

Firstly, the early days at the camp were chaotic and revealed problems in the organisation. Some of the children were discovered to have typhoid, and a few to have tuberculosis. When Franco’s forces captured Bilbao – the area many of the children came from - the news was announced to the children over loudspeakers and with no understanding of what it would mean to them. This resulted in scenes of disorder inside and outside the camp brought on by fear, grief and uncertainty. This was soon calmed down, but for several right-wing newspapers, far more sympathetic to Franco than to the ‘Reds’ of the Republic, the Basque children could now

3. Carmen Walker (nee Gil), recorded interview with Pauline Fraser and Don Watson, 2004.

4. Yvonne Cloud, *The Basque Children in England: An Account of Their Life in North Stoneham Camp* (London, Victor Gollancz 1937) p.52.

be presented in terms of a xenophobic panic. Headlines included: ‘Unruly Mob of Basque Children’, ‘Reared in Habits of Violence’, ‘Spain’s Red Children’, and ‘Basque Children Stampede’. Although their arrival in Southampton had attracted news media sympathy, from now on any allegations received national coverage, generally with little effort to establish the facts (5).

This coverage damaged the national fund-raising for the Basque children, from trade union branches as well as from the general public (6), and there is certainly evidence that it put the North East campaign on the defensive. Activists in the local committees felt it necessary to counter the distortions and exaggerations circulating about the children at major public meetings in Carlisle; Nell Badsey, in charge of the Tynemouth hostel, had to do the same during press interviews. The same was the case at a public campaign meeting in Hexham. At a Hutton Hall ‘open day’ it was reported that ‘there is not the slightest suggestion of any of the untoward incidents reported elsewhere in the country’, especially welcome publicity since the alleged incidents had attracted editorial discussion in the local press (7). Even a serving International Brigade soldier was quoted in a letter to his old National Unemployed Workers’ Movement branch in South Shields as:

‘...expressing astonishment at having read in English newspapers that Spanish Refugee children are said to be bad tempered...People who say that should go through their experiences in Spain, I wonder how they would react?’ (8).

The local support committees clearly believed that they had a public relations task to do.

5. Adrian Bell, *Only For Three Months* p.90-91.

6. Tom Buchanan, *The Role of the British Labour Movement* p 165.

7. *North Mail* 9 August 1937; *Shields Evening News* 21 April 1938; *North Eastern Gazette* 28 July and 4 August 1937

8. *North Mail* 24 September 1937

The Local Committees

Apart from the Catholic Church several of those supporting the local hostels were active in other aspects of Spanish Aid, and campaigning for the refugees was an extension of their existing work. For example in Hexham the Committee included Jim Atkinson, who on behalf of Voluntary Industrial Aid for Spain had, with the help of Corbridge Boys' Club, constructed a 'motor cycle ambulance' and ridden it from Hexham to Valencia for the Republican army medical services (9). At Brampton Alastair Morton, chairman of the Spanish Relief Committee was very involved, as was Carlisle Trades Council, and in Tynemouth the Reverend John Patten of the Northumberland Street Mission to Seamen and a hostel committee member was involved in other activity for the Spanish cause. Support and fund raising for Tynemouth was also organised in Gateshead by the Labour Party and the Independent Labour Party, and G.C. Esther of the Gateshead Spanish Relief Committee. Ruth Pennyman, chair of the Teesside Spanish Relief Committee, organised collection branches and fund raising for Hutton Hall throughout the county (10).

As well as the Catholic Church there was a significant involvement by the local Protestant and Nonconformist churches. Another Tynemouth committee member was a Baptist minister; the Newcastle Presbytery agreed to raise funds through its congregations; the Bishops and a number of clergy in Cumberland and Westmorland signed the public appeal for the Brampton hostel. The Rector of Hexham supported the hostel at 'The Larches' as did Corbridge Parochial Church Council, who placed collection boxes in the church and held collections at its meetings. The chairman of the Newcastle Basque Children's Committee was the Archdeacon of Northumberland (11). Finally the range of political party support was wide enough to include, in Tynemouth for example, the Liberal Borough Councillor R.E. Jackson and the hostel manager, Nell Badsey, who seems to have been the only Communist in the

9. *North Eastern Gazette* 30 June 1937; *Hexham Weekly News* 2 July 1937

10. *Carlisle Journal* 7 May 1937; *North Mail* 19 April 1937 and 24 August 1937; *North East Gazette* 20 August 1937

11. *Carlisle Journal* 11 June 1937; *Hexham Courant* 27 November and 4 December 1937

region to have been involved with the Basque refugees virtually full-time (12).

Finance and Fund Raising

The Basque government had insisted that the children be looked after in groups, as opposed to temporarily fostered in single households, believing that this would help to preserve their cultural identity. This also meant that the responsibility for the costs could not be met by one host family or individual for one child; the costs of a large group of children could only be met by organisations. Although the leadership of the NJCSR always chose to campaign in a ‘broad’ way, seeking single-issue alliances regardless of any other differences, in this case the motive was also the only practical one: no single organisation could meet the expense of looking after a large number of children. It was, too, an open ended commitment. After the capture of Bilbao and the exodus of adult refugees around Spain and into France, it could not be predicted when the children would return.

Sympathetic owners lent the properties in Tynemouth and Hexham to the BCC, and similarly Sir Alfred and Lady Pease lent Hutton Hall to the Committee. In Brampton the former Workhouse – rapidly renamed as ‘The Children’s Hostel’ – had been empty for some time but seemed to be the best available building in the county. The costs of the refurbishment were ‘heavy’ but ‘met privately’ and were not drawn from the funds being raised for the support of the children. Beds and other essentials were obtained at cost, the cleaning and refitting of the hostel carried out by volunteers, including craftsmen and electricians from local factories and Naworth Colliery. At Hutton Hall that work was carried out by volunteers from the Middlesbrough Settlement (13).

Support for three of the four hostels was widespread and its sources various. South Shields Left Book Club held a film show of Pudofkin’s *Storm Over Asia* to buy blankets for Percy Park, while North Shields Methodist Sisterhood performed two one-act plays to raise funds at Howard Street Baptist Church. A group of teachers or a trade union branch, for example, would agree to ‘sponsor’ a particular child by donating a fixed sum each week, and the

12 *Shields News* 19 December 1937

13 *Carlisle Journal* 11, 15 and 22 June 1937; *North Eastern Gazette* 3 July 1937

regularity made this a preferred source of income. Donations of money, food and clothing came from Co-op stores, individual shopkeepers or from collections at workplaces. Collections in Westmorland and Cumberland found good responses in Wigton, classed at the time as a 'distressed area'. Knitting parties supplied woollens, gifts of money and food were known to arrive anonymously and for a while in Tynemouth the very appearance of the refugees was enough to start impromptu collections among complete strangers (14).

One obvious route to raising funds was through the visual presence the children could provide. The Brampton 'colony' mounted evenings of traditional music, song and dance at the Queen's Hall in Carlisle, at the opening of the town playground in Brampton and around the local villages. At Spennymoor too the children from the Catholic home performed in national dress at village occasions (15).

A crucial factor in financing the campaign was the support it attracted from the local labour movements. In Cumbria although the Brampton hostel clearly attracted a high level of middle class support it was also gaining practical help from miners and factory workers. At Tynemouth Nell Badsey drew attention to the generous and consistent support 40 Percy Park received from the Northumberland and Durham Miners' Lodges – '...have responded magnificently to appeals for assistance and not one of them has turned them down' (16). Nevertheless she still had to appeal regularly for funds; absolutely everything had to be raised from donations and for an indeterminate length of time.

But in Hexham there seems to have been little, if any, labour movement involvement, probably due to the nature of the locality in 1937, and as will be seen this was to add to its problems.

14. *Carlisle Journal* 30 November 1937; *Shields News* 3 August 1937

15. *Carlisle Journal* 23 July 1937 and 4 February 1938; *North Mail* 23 September 1937

16. *Shields Evening News* 21 April 1938. Carmen Walker (interview 2004) confirms that 'Mrs. Badsey always said the miners never let us down'.

Life in the North East ‘Colonies’

Reading between the lines of speeches and articles it can be said that whereas the Basque children were certainly not ‘out of control’ they could be hard work. Nor was this surprising, given that they were suddenly in a strange land where they couldn’t understand the language and without their families, whom they knew to be at risk. There was also of course what they had gone through, as was explained to the local press at least once:

One twelve year old said that his uncle and cousin had been killed in an air raid in Durango. Artillery in the mountains were trained on the principal streets of the town and kept up an almost ceaseless bombardment. The death and destruction they have witnessed at such a young age is appalling (17).

Some problems were immediate, such as children hoarding food, and at first in Tynemouth boys were terrified by an artillery display at the Castle and hid under beds in panic whenever an aircraft approached (18). Dealing with all this as well as the daily round of cooking, cleaning, washing and providing education and a life were the small numbers of the older refugees and local volunteers. A young Spanish teacher and assistant were assigned to groups of around twenty children and in addition volunteers organised by the local committees carried out a lot of the practical work.

Spanish speakers were obviously in demand because they were crucial to the children’s understanding of and participation in the life around them. So at Hutton Hall two local English teachers fluent in Spanish came forward, Spanish speakers living in the Tynemouth and Carlisle areas became involved, as they did in Hexham. In the Catholic homes there are reports that a number of the clergy and nuns were bilingual. The children were educated in

17. *Shields News* 2 August 1937

18. *Shields News* 2 July and 9 August 1937

the hostels themselves and not local schools because of the language barriers. At Percy Park for example Tynemouth Borough Council donated schoolroom equipment, as did Cumberland County Council for Brampton (19).

It is evident that efforts were made by the Basque Children's and Spanish Relief Committees to include the children in their local communities. In Tynemouth the local boy scouts frequently made up the opposing football team, and local families with boys the same age would take them out. Basque children took part in the sports at Boldon Colliery and District's Field Day, and five boys from Percy Park were in the team representing North Shields YMCA at the North East Boys Clubs Games in 1938. The Hutton Hall children were included in the Middlesbrough Unemployed Association's annual Christmas Treat in 1938 (20).

Nevertheless there are clues that what was provided for the children varied from place to place. The BCC national inspector, charged with monitoring standards of care at the hostels, described the refugees at Hutton Hall as 'living in surroundings that any child might envy...it is probably the finest centre in the country of the accommodation of Basque refugee children' (21). Percy Park too was in a premier residential area by the sea, but other hostels seem to have been in more difficult circumstances. Although the Catholics raised funds through their own networks a public appeal was made for their Scotswood hostel because the parish was 'not blessed with much of the wealth of this world'. Appeals for 'The Larches' in Hexham stated that it needed carpets and coal, and later for toys, games, balls and gardening equipment (22). Later too public appeals for 'The Larches' revealed that the hostel was having serious problems in gaining support locally, receiving a low response to requests for furniture, cutlery, kitchen utensils that would normally go to jumble sales. In December 1937, after barely four months, the Hexham hostel closed and the children were dispersed to other 'colonies'

19. *Shields News* 19 December 1937

20. *Newcastle Journal* 7 February 1938; *North Eastern Gazette* 5 January 1938

21. *North Eastern Gazette* 28 July and 20 August 1937

22. *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* 2 July 1937; *Hexham Courant* 11 September and 4 December 1937; *Newcastle Journal* 18 September 1937.

around the country. (23) The official reason was lack of financial support although there were also major problems which were not made public about the way hostel was being run.

There was a further political element to the quality of care the young refugees received. It has been said already how it was clear at the Southampton camp that the children had come from highly political environments. There is evidence that this was true of those dispersed to the North East and Cumbria. For example a teacher bound for Brampton explained how some of the children could tell which English newspapers were ‘fascist’ ones, that the Republic was not being aided by other countries in the way Franco was, and that the Basques ‘were Catholics once but since the war have taken other views’. At ‘The Larches’ a reporter was told that ‘Most of the children have lost relatives or friends during the war. They all hate General Franco.’(24). The observer at Southampton had concluded that the emotional reassurance the children needed was therefore best expressed politically, through a shared bond of anti-fascism and support for the Republic, even something as simple as a *Salud!* (25). Interviews with former Basque refugees in Britain suggest that this was right; where a hostel had a good level of labour movement participation there was a political community of support which the children appreciated greatly (26). At Percy Park under Nell Badsey this would have been the case, and at Brampton too through the involvement of Carlisle Trades Council and the local unions.

Opposing Voices

There was some opposition to the proposal to bring the children to the region even among sympathisers. The British government estimated ten shillings a week to maintain a refugee and this was considerably more than the three shillings paid for a child of local unemployed parents by the Public Assistance Committee. Also, that raising funds for the Basques would compete with the range of local children’s charities that also had to appeal regularly for

23. *Hexham Courant* 11 December 1937; Adrian Bell, *Only For Three Months* p.88

24. *Carlisle Journal* 22 June 1937; *North Mail* 11 September 1937

25. Yvonne Cloud, *The Basque Children in England* p.60

26. Adrian Bell, *Only For Three Months* p.69

money. For example before the children arrived in the region the Lord Mayor of Newcastle, speaking at a meeting of the Poor Children's Holiday Association, expressed this concern at the effect fund raising for the refugees might have on the finances of local children's charities, concluding that 'we must look after our own first'. This drew an angry reaction from two local clergymen, one of whom pointed out the sum of three shillings was more a comment on the attitudes of the PAC than on the refugee campaign (27). Nevertheless this apparent discrepancy between money for a foreign refugee child in the area and that for a local child in need did surface at public meetings, where it had to be explained that ten shillings included the overheads involved in running a group home (28).

Some residents of Percy Park objected to the establishment of the hostel on the grounds that the covenants governing the property stipulated that it had to be maintained as a private residence. Within two days of the refugees' arrival some neighbours were quoted in the local press as saying that they felt sorry for the boys, but that they should have been consulted before the hostel was established, that the children would be disorderly, or that it would destroy the amenities of the area, or that it would be the beginning of turning Percy Park into a street of flats and hotels. Four days after the children arrived a notice to quit was served by agents of the Duke of Northumberland, on whose estate Percy Park was; some residents had persuaded him to enforce the covenants. But when the boys left over a year later some of the residents admitted that their objections were really different: 'we contend that the Basque scheme was a purely political one and run by people of the extreme Left' (29) – possibly a reference to Nell Badsey's Communist Party membership. In any event the notice to quit was not enforced.

27. *Newcastle Journal* 5 and 6 July 1937

28. *North Mail* 9 August 1937

29. *Shields News* 30 July 1937; *Shields Evening News* 9 January 1939

The middle class opposition in Hexham seems to have been more formidable, and there is some evidence that here too there was a political element. A press editorial was generally sympathetic to the refugees, but also ‘found it difficult to understand the opposition aroused in some quarters by the Hexham hostel...it seems to be believed that them coming here is part of a political stunt...’ Allegations that the children had damaged the fencing around ‘The Larches’ were put to the Urban District Council, and the Council was also quick to clarify that it would not be under any expense should an epidemic break out at the hostel. But the point is that in contrast to the other three hostels the Hexham Committee could not raise enough support locally to make theirs viable - which suggests that the opposition there had an impact – although this must be set alongside the internal management problems. (30).

Carmen Walker has recalled that there was some, although not much, antipathy in Percy Park:

‘They were very good, the people, except the next- door neighbour on one side. There was one neighbour, she was very, very, good. They had long gardens, allotments almost, and they used to send rhubarb, which we’d never had in Spain. And then on the other side it was the opposite. She was horrible. Whatever the children did, it was always wrong. If they played in the back garden, or in the front. They would play football in the garden, and going in for the ball, as boys would, you know. I don’t think it was politics with her, she just didn’t like foreigners, the English had to be best’ (31).

She remembers too that ‘some people were good, very kind’, and this is certainly the impression given by accounts in the local press. One of the very few hostile letters printed was quickly exposed as part of a national letter-writing campaign organised by the British

30. *Hexham Courant* 18 September 1937; *Hexham Weekly News* 5 November 1937;
Hexham Courant 11 September 1937

31 Carmen Walker, interview 2004.

Union of Fascists. (32) It is important not to make too much of the negative reactions. The communities in the region responded well to the children and to the efforts to include them in local activities. After one year the local press described the Basque boys in one area as ‘as much a part of Tynemouth as Percy Park itself’ (33).

The Role of the Catholic Church

The Catholic Church in England, certainly its newspapers, regarded the Spanish war as one for civilisation, in which the institutions and values of Catholic Christianity had to be defended against the forces of atheism and Communism. As a natural sympathiser with Franco the Church was a reluctant and comparatively short-lived partner in the refugees’ cause. But paradoxically in the North East and Cumbria, as in the rest of the country, the Catholic Church made the greatest single contribution to the care of the Basque refugees. The numbers quoted in contemporary publications vary greatly, but at the end of the Church participation in 1938 Joseph McCormack, the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle, reported that 227 had been supported over the year (34). These were St. Vincent’s Home in Brunel Terrace in Scotswood, the Convent of Mercy in Wigton and the convent at Nazareth House in Carlisle, St. Peter’s children’s home (or ‘Poor Law School’) in Gainford near Darlington; St. Mary’s Home near Spennymoor and St. Joseph’s Home in Milbank Road, Darlington. The numbers in each could vary from six girls in a convent to one hundred and forty boys in a home.

The *Northern Catholic Calendar* set out the Church’s position on the Spanish war and the refugees very clearly:

An unfortunate sequel to this struggle for Christianity in Spain has been the arrival of Spanish refugees in England; many of them should prove an excellent object lesson to our fellow countrymen of the evils

32. *Shields News* 6 July 1938

33. *Shields Evening News* 6 July 1938

34. Bishop Joseph McCormack, *Pastoral Letter* June 1938 - Hexham and Newcastle Diocesan Archive, Pastoral Letters 1936-1947

of Red propaganda and teaching. Some 350 of these refugees have found a home in the diocesan orphanages and the cost of their upkeep must be found by the diocese. It is wrong that they should have been brought here, but now that they are in our midst we must do what we can for them. Generous benefactors have helped, but, even so, the cost of their keep far exceeds the donations. (35).

Thus the local Church was quick to invoke the press allegations and take the opportunity to score political points. Bishop McCormack had already summed up the Church's position in his Pastoral Letter to the Hexham and Newcastle Diocese in June 1937. Here the Bishop stated that his motive in originally offering to support up to 325 children was that he 'feared that their faith might be endangered' – presumably meaning that they could be looked after by non-Catholic agencies. He continued that, 'We did not bring them and many of us think they ought never to have been brought. However, they are here now. Not one of us, surely, can dare to turn them away' (36). But this less than enthusiastic position did not impede the local Catholic relief effort.

Bishop McCormack outlined the financial arrangements needed to support the children in his Pastoral Letter. When a Catholic child was placed in a Diocesan Poor Law Home by public authorities that child was partly maintained by those authorities and partly by the voluntary contributions the Homes could raise. But children who were 'voluntary cases' – and the Basque children were classed as such – had to be entirely maintained by voluntary contributions with no assistance from the state. Again this was estimated at ten shillings per week. This was achieved in several different ways. One was by a form of 'adoption', whereby one or more families, streets or individuals paid for an individual named child – very similar to the systems used for the non-Church hostels. Collection boxes were a regular feature at services and Church functions, and fund

35. *The Northern Catholic Calendar: Diocesan Chronicle 1936-1937* p.117-118 (HNDA)

36. Bishop Joseph McCormack, *Pastoral Letter June 1937 – 'Basque Refugee Children'* p.1-2 (HNDA)

raising events were included in the usual round of Church affairs. The project was managed by a diocesan 'Basque Children's Refugee Fund Committee,' chaired by Father Parker, Secretary to the Diocesan Homes.

In some respects the Church was well placed to help the Basques since it already had a network of children's homes – the 'diocesan orphanages'- and convents around which the young refugees could be dispersed. Unlike the trades union and voluntary groups it did not need to find and maintain new premises. But it did share the problems of raising funds to support the children once they had been housed in the homes. There was an added complication since the Church chose to remain aloof from other fund raising efforts for the Basques. For example in Newcastle, although there is evidence that the Trades Council made an approach to the Catholic Committee it decided to raise funds for the care and maintenance of the children in the Catholic homes only (37). Each diocese had to rely on its own efforts, although some official help was received. Darlington Education Committee furnished additional classrooms at the Homes and the local Public Assistance Committee lent beds, bedding and other essential equipment to the homes in its area.

The efforts in the Newcastle and Hexham Diocese were a success. The Bishop's Pastoral Letter of June 1938, circulated two months after the last of the children who had been looked after by the Church had been repatriated, recorded that the funds raised had exceeded the sum required (38).

It is not clear how much the Church and non-Church 'colonies' had to do with each other; Carmen Walker recalls visits between Brampton and Percy Park, but definitely not with Scotswood (39). Probably the mutual suspicion with which the two camps would have regarded each other, as will be seen, ruled out any contact between them.

37. Refugee Fund Committee Minutes 16 June and 30 June 1937 (Diocesan Homes Committee Minute Book 1926-1942, HNDA); *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* 2 July 1937

38. Bishop Joseph McCormack, *Pastoral Letter* June 1938 p.3 (HNDA)

39. Carmen Walker, interview 2004

The Repatriation Conflict

The Vatican sent an Apostolic Delegate to Bilbao in August 1937, barely two months after the fall of the city. This was widely interpreted as an implicit endorsement of Franco's authority, against that of the elected government (40). The Pope charged the Delegate with the task of enquiring about the evacuated children, and Vatican lobbying of both the British government and the English Church hierarchy began. Within days, in Newcastle, and before many of the children allocated to the region had actually arrived, Father Parker suggested that it was time to start sending groups of the children back. His argument was that the Catholic homes were receiving letters from parents saying that conditions were now better, with the fighting over in Bilbao and plenty of food available. He also believed that as time went on it would be increasingly difficult to look after so many children. The Spanish Embassy brought the press cutting to the attention of the BCC, which suggests that this was an early indication of the imminent political controversy. (41).

Father Parker's intervention drew a robust response from G.C. Esther, a Labour Party activist and Secretary of the Gateshead Spanish Relief Committee. He put forward what was to be the national position of the BCC, that they suspected that many of the letters being received from parents had been written under duress, the result of pressure exerted by the Francoist authorities. The BCC and its local hostels, by contrast, were receiving letters from parents requesting that their children stayed where they were. Esther was obviously aware of Bishop McCormack's position that the children should not have been permitted to come, and cited this as evidence that Father Parker had taken the Bishop's position to its logical conclusion. He received some support from a local press editorial, which expressed surprise that a priest who had been so active in arranging support for the children should advocate returning them

40. Thomas Moloney, *Westminster, Whitehall and the Vatican: The Role of Cardinal Hinsley 1935-43* (Tunbridge Wells, Burns and Oates 1985) p.73

41. Canon Craven, letter to Wilfred Roberts 17 August 1937; Spanish Embassy London, letter to Basque Children's Committee 30 August 1937 (Papers of Wilfred Roberts M.P, University of Warwick Modern Records Centre MSS 308/3/RO/1-58); *North Mail* 20 August 1937.

to a country still racked by war (42).

During the next three months the Catholic Church continued to argue within the BCC that it must be a priority to return children to their parents where they could be contacted and requested it, and to express alarm at the huge and open-ended financial commitment that was involved, especially since the end of the fighting in the Basque country had removed the need for it (43). The view of the BCC was that it had plenty of evidence that ‘requests’ from parents were not authentic and that each should be verified; that many of the children were now orphaned, or that their parents were refugees and could not yet be contacted. The fighting around Bilbao might have been over but there were still thousands of adult refugees on the roads and the country was suffering desperate poverty. As 1937 drew to a close it was clear that the two sides of the repatriation debate were simply the two sides of support for or hostility to the Spanish Republic.

The British representative of the Apostolic Delegate in Bilbao was Father Gabana, a Spanish priest who had earlier had his ‘the truth about Spain’ lecture tour of Britain curtailed after protests by the Communist M.P. Willie Gallacher. The Home Office decided that the priest’s conditions of residence precluded him from political activity, thus preventing him, according to the Catholic press, from ‘unmasking the lies of Sovietism’ (44). Father Gabana took the lead on pressing the BCC on repatriation but without the results the Church desired. In October 1937, amidst mutual accusations of political motivation, the English Cardinal Hinsley withdrew his representative, Canon Craven, from the BCC. Cardinal Hinsley now dealt directly with the Franco regime to organise the repatriation of the children in the Catholic homes, which was largely complete by May 1938 (45)

42. *North Mail* 24 August 1937

43. Canon Craven, letter to Duchess of Atholl, 1 October 1937 (Roberts Papers, MRC)

44. *Catholic Times* 16 April 1937; *Northern Catholic Calendar* op.cit p.117

45. Thomas Maloney, *Westminster, Whitehall and the Vatican* p.73.

The Church also supported the Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee, which lobbied the government and sympathetic M.Ps for immediate repatriation. Members included the Duke of Wellington, a major landowner in Spain, and Edith Londonderry; after one of their interventions following a local public meeting a press report called them 'Franco's Friends'. Bishop McCormack similarly encouraged the diocese to lobby for repatriation (46).

This split seems to have encouraged a more politically articulate stand by the BCC, including this region. A national press release published locally stated that:

'The BCC considers that the bombing of open towns in Spain by General Franco makes it impossible for the Basque children in England to be sent back to eastern Spain. The effect of returning these children to Bilbao would be that they would all be brought up in Fascist reformatories or in Catholic seminaries against the wishes of their parents and alienating them entirely' (47).

The chairman of the Carlisle Spanish Relief Committee justified the children's extended stay in the country with 'As soon as the Fascist forces cease bombing the civilian population in Catalonia, and destroying food convoys...it will be possible to send the children back to their parents or to institutions there' (48). When Nell Badsey was interviewed on her return from the Spanish border, where she had been a member of a national group escorting 106 repatriated children, her readers should have been clear whose side she was on:

'When we got to the frontier Spanish Fascist officers and soldiers struck me with fear so far as the children's future is concerned. They treated the children in a cold way, with studied contempt...referred to them

46. *Carlisle Journal* 17 December 1937; Refugee Fund Committee Minutes 3 September 1937 (HNDA)

47. *Shields Evening News* 2 February 1938

48. *Carlisle Journal* 11 February 1938

among themselves as *rojos, reds...* some of the children had previously run over the bridge with machine guns on them when General Franco took Bilbao’.

She went on to state that reports that the repatriated children were happy to be returning to Spain were ‘unfounded lies’, presumably a response to the letters to that effect being published by local priests (49). These are examples of how the local campaigns were able to present the children as victims of fascism, not just war, and of Franco’s calculated strategy of waging war against civilian populations.

Repatriation was not the only source of conflict in this region. An exchange took place in the local press between Father Parker and the Spanish Consul in Newcastle. According to the Consul he was being denied access to the children in Catholic homes in the diocese. According to Father Parker he had been invited to St. Vincent’s but had caused a scene there, had been asked to leave, and had subsequently written ‘an unpleasant’ letter to the priest, and the decision had been taken that he was not a suitable person to be admitted to the homes. What was not said in the press was that the Consul had accused Parker’s committee of using ‘fascist propaganda’ in the homes. Instead Father Parker insisted that the Church ‘abhorred politics’ where the children were concerned (50). This episode illustrates that, given the fundamentally different attitudes to the Spanish Republic; any alliance with the Catholic Church was bound to be fragile.

Exile

For the twelve priests and other adults, mainly young women, who had accompanied the children to Britain to help with their care and education, repatriation was even more problematic. Franco had passed a Law of Political Responsibilities as a vehicle for the wholesale imprisonment or execution of Republican supporters, and this remained a statute until 1965. Within a month of the fall of Bilbao in

49. *Shields Evening News* 9 February 1938; *Newcastle Journal* 4 March 1938; *Shields Evening News* 23 April 1938.

50. *North Mail* 16 September and 23 September 1937. My thanks to Lewis Mates for drawing my attention to this. See also Refugee Fund Committee Minutes 14 July 1937 (HNDA)

June 1937 1,000 left-wingers and Basque nationalists there had been executed and 16,000 gaoled; a year later the picture was similar. According to the new Falangist mayor of the city Bilbao had been ‘redeemed for ever from the red scum in the service of Moscow and the Viscayon scum in the service of separatism.’(51). October 1937 the Bishop of Vitoria had circulated a Bulletin in which he stated that those responsible for the evacuation of the children had committed ‘*un crimen espantoso*’, an appalling crime, and those who had helped ‘*contubernio con los enemigos de Dios y de la patria*’.- had conspired with the enemies of God and of their country (52). Clearly those who had accompanied the children could be in danger. Carmen Walker recalls:

‘My father in Spain was in what would have been the Labour Party here, and he was in prison. He was released before the war ended. When there was talk about me going back, they wrote to say they would be very pleased to see me, but we haven’t very much room in the house, and if you are coming you will have to go and live with Pilar. Now I knew Pilar was in prison, so this was a way of telling me it was dangerous for me to go back’ (53).

She did not visit Spain again until 1966, when Franco finally declared an amnesty for his civil war opponents. Similarly the *senorita* at the Catholic Nazareth House in Carlisle had to emigrate to America when the children there were repatriated (54).

The Basque priests faced the same problems. In December 1937 Bishop McCormack received a

51. Michael Roberts, *A Time of Silence: Civil War and the Culture of Repression in Franco’s Spain 1936-1945* (Cambridge, University Press 1998) p.42

52. Gregorio Arrien, *Ninos Vascos Evacuados A Gran Bretana 1937-1940* (Bilbao, Estudios Graticos 1991) p. 92.

53. Carmen Walker, interview 2004

54. Adrian Bell, *Only For Three Months* p. 115

letter sent on behalf of the Secretariat of State of the Vatican through the Papal envoy in London. This seems to have been sent to all Bishops who had Basque priests in their dioceses; two, Father Orbegozo and Father Gorosarri were at St. Joseph's in Darlington. It seemed that the Secretariat had recently received information that the 'refugee Basque priests' were continuing 'their well-known political propaganda, and even co-operating with the committees which are hostile to the return of the Basque children, to prevent their return home'. The Secretariat believed that the attitude of these priests was causing 'grave moral harm to so many poor children' and it urged the English Bishops 'to make these priests desist from such co-operation', presumably with the non-Church Basque Children's Committees (55). No evidence was offered for any of these allegations, but they do indicate the pressures the Basque refugee priests were under. Father Orbegozo was still at St. Joseph's in Darlington early in 1940, and correspondence shows that he was desperately trying to avoid going back to Spain. He informed Bishop McCormack:

'With sorrow I let your Lordship know that I cannot go to France because the French military authorities have denied Basque priests admission at France: so they let me know today from London. I have lately received suggestions from my native country that I must not return there yet; therefore I myself command to the kindness of your Lordship, and ask humbly that I may continue at St. Joseph's until I can return to Spain, or your Lordship deign occupy me in any humble priestly business at any place of your diocese'.

'I cannot yet understand well especially quick English talk and I have also difficulty to talk fast, but in two months I think will progress so that I may hear confession and instruction. I do not ask any money I shall be satisfied with maintenance.' (56).

55. Secretariat of State to the Vatican, letter to Bishop McCormack 15 December 1937 (HNDA File 391)

56. Father Emmanuel Orbegozo, letter to Bishop McCormack 7 February 1940 (HNDA File 391)

The Bishop replied that there was ‘no hope of priestly work here’ and that Father Orbezo should ‘go to Spain where priests are needed’. The priest replied:

‘I understand well the advice and desire of your Lordship about my returning...I cannot dare yet to return to Spain according to the information I have lately received; therefore I pray my Lord again and again for God’s sake have mercy on me. After a short time I will be able to do something with children and even with adults.’

The Bishop’s note states simply ‘Answered. Go to Spain’. A week later the priest wrote again:

‘I have written to my own Lord Bishop asking him if I can return, and when I receive his reply I will let your Lordship know. My fear in returning is only from the civil or military authorities, but to write to say this or anything else against them may be very dangerous for me, and it will be better to hold one’s peace’ (57)

The fate of Father Orbezo is unclear; his colleague Father Gorosarri had earlier left Darlington for Belgium. Several of the priests who came with the children went through periods of exile before resuming their work in Spain. A Spanish historian has stated that in France and Britain the Catholic bishops, hostile as they were to the Spanish Republic, shunned the priests who had accompanied the children (58). This may or may not be an accurate judgement, but on the basis of this correspondence Father Orbezo does not seem to have had much support from the Hexham and Newcastle Diocese. Nor were the priest’s fears ill founded: during 1937 Franco had executed sixteen priests and gaoled around three hundred for their Republican or Basque nationalist sympathies, and

57. Father Emmanuel Orbezo, letters to Bishop McCormack 15 and 22 February 1940 (HNDA File 391). The Bishop’s replies are handwritten notes.

58. Gregorio Arrien, *Ninos Vascos Evacuados* p.88

the executions were only stopped because of protests from his Italian allies (59).

Ending

By 1940 there were some 470 of the original 4,000 refugees in Britain. The BCC found it increasingly difficult to raise funds during the Second World War; the hostels, including Percy Park and Brampton, had to close and the remaining children were 'adopted' by individual families (60). The BCC worked with international refugee organisations to continue repatriation but in 1951, when the Committee finally stood down, around 270 were still in Britain, including two or three in the North East. The survivors – and now their children and grandchildren – have formed the British branch of the Basque Children of '37 Association, a lively community dedicated to keeping the story of the 4,000 refugee children alive and to maintaining contact with them.

A number of the repatriated children could not be reunited with their families immediately or even at all. Contemporary research in Spain is beginning to show that, just as the BCC had feared, many were fostered out to other families approved by the authorities, or brought up in fascist reformatories, as the Franco regime attempted to cleanse a generation of left or separatist influences (61)

Political Dimensions

It has been argued that the campaign in support of the Basque children in this region was 'consistently couched in humanitarian and not political terms' and this was why it could build a broad campaign of support among those who were not politically motivated. Also, that the involvement of the local Catholic Church in accommodating so many of the children helped to 'ensure that the politics of the conflict in Spain were not mentioned.' (62).

59 Paul Preston, *Franco* (London, Fontana 1993) p.226

60. *Shields Evening News* 13 March and 21 July 1941; Wilfred Roberts, letter to Spanish Embassy London 8 October 1939 (Roberts Papers MRC)

61. Ricard Vinyes, *Los Ninos Perdidos del Franquismo* (Barcelona, Plaza Janes 2002). Review in Basque Children of '37 UK Newsletter, March 2005.

62. Lewis Mates, 'Britain's Popular Front? The Case Of The Tyneside Foodship Campaign, 1938-1939' *Labour History Review* vol.69 no.1 April 2004 p. 47

As will be seen this is too simplistic a picture of the politics of the national and North East campaigns although there is certainly evidence to support the argument. For example when the Labour Party prospective parliamentary candidate for Stockton addressed a meeting organised by the Townswomen's Guild to raise funds for Hutton Hall, she 'described the atrocities committed in the civil war' without, in the press report at least, attributing them. The public appeal in Cumberland and Westmorland stated that '...no political question of as to the rights and wrongs of the war in Spain can arise when making the appeal on behalf of children, who are innocent sufferers from the war'. A national letter from the BCC in the *North Mail* as the children were arriving assured readers that '...it is not a question of politics. It is a simple humanitarian issue and one in which we should all welcome the opportunity to co-operate' (63). Some of the key activists in the campaign to support the Basques in the region undoubtedly were moved by humanitarian over political concerns. Lady Cecilia Roberts (sister-in-law to Wilfred) for instance, argued on several occasions that 'politics and differences should be forgotten' in the cause of the Basque refugees (64).

But it has already been demonstrated that the repatriation issue caused the local campaigners to make a political case as well as a humanitarian one. Eleanor Rathbone, writing in a personal capacity but inevitably associated with the BCC, published a nationally circulated press letter that was directly political, making a direct link with the government's policy of 'non-intervention':

The British and French governments have some responsibility for the sufferings and dangers from which we rescued these children. Whether the Non-Intervention Pact which they initiated was right or wrong, unquestionably it decided the fate of the Basques by making it impossible for them to purchase aircraft or heavy munitions with which to resist the German and Italian planes that bombed them into submission (65).

63. *North Eastern Gazette* 9 July 1937; *Carlisle Journal* 11 June 1937; *North Mail* 29 May 1937.

64. *Carlisle Journal* 4 June 1937

65. *Newcastle Journal* 11 February 1938

There are examples too of the local campaigns associating their work with the Left in the conflict. Basque children were on the platform at the May Day rally on the Town Moor in 1938, organised by Newcastle Labour Party, where two thousand people applauded an AEU resolution deploring the ‘fascist foreign policy’ of the National Government and declaring the determination of the British labour movement to ‘secure arms for the Spanish people’. Basque children were on the platform at the memorial meeting in Blyth Miners Welfare Hall for the Communist Councillor Bob Elliott, killed in action with the International Brigade, when Labour and Communist speakers attacked the policy of non-intervention. Basque children were on the platform with Nell Badsey at a public meeting in Bedlington where the M.P. for Blaydon called for the scrapping of non-intervention so that the Spanish government could buy arms and end the war (66). Thus in the public campaigns of the labour movement there were occasions when the Basque children’s cause was directly associated with the key demands of the Left over Spain, and not simply as a humanitarian issue.

There is some evidence too that the openly political stances did not alienate the presumably non political supporters: after Nell Badsey appeared at the Bedlington meeting with some children North Shields Methodist Sisterhood were still holding fund raising events for the Tynemouth hostel (67).

Therefore it is too sweeping to conclude that the campaign for the Basque children in this region was ‘consistently’ couched in humanitarian terms so that the politics of the war were downplayed. The coalition of support the campaign generated contained the highly political, where support for the Republic was concerned, as well as the primarily humanitarian, in apparently productive co-existence

Conclusion

It has been said of the Basque children campaign that ‘the whole episode was clearly a grand humanitarian gesture as well as, politically, an affront to Franco’s side in the Civil War’ (68). Franco’s side were only too aware of the propaganda dangers of the refugee children, which was

66. *North Mail* 2 May 1938; *North Mail* 13 September 1937; *North Mail* 21 February 1938. Nell Badsey spoke at the Bedlington meeting but her speech was not reported.

67. *Shields Evening News* 24 February 1938

68. Tom Buchanan, *The Role of the British Labour Movement* p.155

why they and their supporters and sympathisers were so quick and so tenacious in their counter-campaign for repatriation; it probably also explains the venom with which the Basque priests and the other adults in the evacuation were denounced. It is hard to imagine that the key instigators, Leah Manning, Eleanor Rathbone and Wilfred Roberts, anti-fascists and critics of non-intervention that they were (69), could not see the symbolic political value of what they began. Given the anti-Republican attitudes of the Catholic Church any co-operation from them was always going to be unstable, and so the repatriation conflict should not be found surprising.

All the examples of the local and national BCC taking an articulate political stance on the Spanish conflict took place after the Catholic Church formally withdrew from the Committee in October 1937. This may be coincidental, but it is more likely that the end of Catholic involvement and the campaign for blanket repatriation meant that those working with the Basque children could more openly associate their cause with public support for the Spanish Republic; indeed, having to explain the problems of the Church's position on repatriation involved taking a stand on the Franco regime and its conduct of the war. The campaigns for the hostels in the North East and Cumbria were coalitions of the political and the humanitarian with neither cancelling the other out. Their achievement in the region was a noteworthy contribution to the Republican cause.

Then and Now

As was said initially, an historical account of the settlement of refugees in the North East may have some implications for the present, despite the major differences and the unique nature of the Basque episode, and so this is worth discussing. In 1937 there was a scare campaign conducted by national newspapers uninterested in presenting the facts of the matter, or indeed in even finding out what they were. There were some reactions from xenophobic elements and from those who believed that 'we should put our own first'. There was a campaign to repatriate refugees that was quite oblivious to the circumstances to which they might return, and which provided a vehicle for the political far right. There was a government whose attitude was at best indifferent. Ranged against this and supporting the

69. Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven, Yale University Press 2004)

refugees were, in varying strengths, church groups, trades union branches and voluntary organisations. All of which may have some contemporary resonance.

In this context comment can be made about the support for the Tynemouth hostel, which was successful on two fronts: it survived financially and seems to have provided a high standard for as long as any of the others, and it rode through a potentially disastrous protest against it. Two noticeable features were the handling of the local press, presumably by Nell Badsey, and some success at including the children in local activities. Both can be said to have built local positive images to counter the negative ones that had been created by national sources. These two tactics of social inclusion and building a local and positive counter-image are tactics that may bear repetition in a new context.